



THE KENAN  
INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS  
at Duke University

# WHAT IS ETHICS IN THE UNIVERSITY?

Srinivas Aravamudan

September 2008

This paper is in response to Geoffrey Harpham's essay, *Ethics*. It was presented during the "Use and Abuse of Ethics" seminar on September 26, 2008, as part of the "What is Ethics? And Who Cares?" series hosted by the Kenan Institute for Ethics.

I want to turn around the questions that frame this conversation, “what is ethics?” “and “who cares?” into the more direct one of “what is ethics in the university?” I think we can answer the “who cares?” question first, in that we are here because the Kenan Institute for Ethics cares. And, obviously, all of you assembled here care. Now, Geoff provides a story of the eclipse of ethics in what he calls the theoretical era of poststructuralism from 1966-1987, and a return to ethics after the bracing challenge posed to literary theory by the De Man affair. I disagree a little bit with Geoff’s story. In the first section of his essay, “Ethics In Our Time,” Geoff points to some of the grand statements of theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Jameson, and Irigaray, who often named an opposition to ethics in pursuit of their projects. Perhaps what is not so clear in his summary of these positions is what many of these thinkers were proposing in place of “ethics.” The ethics that those thinkers were attacking was a scapegoat, perhaps, but it stood for inflexible normativeness or rule-boundedness with implications of conformity in relation to existing social and political hierarchies. In place of this ethics, these thinkers proposed different justice projects that had their own implicit norms. Ethics was being challenged by pointing to the inevitable contamination of the ethical by the political leading to this new category of the ethicopolitical. The “bad ethics” that was being attacked or disrespected during this era allegedly reinforced constrained forms of subjectivity, gender normativity, or class hierarchy, and by attacking this “bad ethics” these thinkers were attempting, at least, to think beyond humanism, the normative subject, the self, and the individual as guarantors of all that is true, just, and good in a particular society. What would need to be overturned to create a just society? Whose voices did the old ethics suppress? What were the effects of material and social oppressions that continued to be justified by a regressive discourse of ethics? Against the police function of a repressive ethics, several of these thinkers suggested critical or utopian philosophies that they thought could be liberatory, whether derived from Marxist critiques of capitalism, feminist critiques of patriarchy, anticolonial and antiracist critiques of Eurocentrism and racial hegemony, or critiques of Western metaphysics and old-style humanism. Let us not forget the context of these debates that go back to the (hallowed and reviled) 1960s and 1970s, during which time these theories were born, when there was a strong antiwar movement in several countries mobilizing against Vietnam globally, and when there were new forms of social and sexual experimentation challenging social norms, during which time bourgeois morality and heteronormativity were being questioned, and also when the New Left was scathingly critical not just of an old enemy, capitalism, but also just as dismissive of various organized forms of leftist politics, including the repudiation of Stalinism, the failure of Eurocommunism, and the terrible transition from the promise of decolonization to Third World dictatorships.

Therefore, the context here was much broader than simply that of an intra-literary dust-up that happened because of the revelations of Paul de Man’s Nazi past. Now, 1987, if we take that year up as a moment of change or reaction, depending on your point-of-view, was also the time when at least in the US and in Britain, Reagan and Thatcher had effectively destroyed whatever gains the Old and the New Left had made in the last few decades, and if we advance a few more years till the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, we are talking about a rough date for the return of old-style ethics during a time of Western triumphalism and full reaction to all forms of left-liberal thought, a time when the neocons were preparing their rise and those such as Francis Fukuyama were declaring the end of history. Now, I don’t actually think ethics ever went away from literary study and nor did it return as dramatically as Geoff suggests. The important thing to stress is how willing we are to think of ethics not just as one set of references to Kant or Aristotle, but to the question of the simultaneous presence of difference and normativity in a number of social and political movements, and their intellectual repercussions in the university in specific disciplines from the study of literature and other cultural forms to history and anthropology. In fact, these heterogeneous challenges to ethics were attempts to expand the scope of ethics through the insertion of difference and the overturning of regulative ethical ideals. I want to initially broaden out Geoff’s focus on deconstruction as the scapegoat for the holiday from ethics as well as the return to ethics, even though I will return to Derrida a bit later in my remarks. To restrict the term ethical as only about the categorical imperative, and only to discussions of Kant would be a big mistake, as it also leaves out the way in which ethics returns in a globalized world through imagining multiple aspirational norms derived from a range of religious and cultural traditions. In this regard, Kant is the tip of the iceberg. We have to be aware of multiple axiologies or meta-ethical value-systems, within

which there are different ethical norms and also deviations from and challenges to those norms. In this context, the Levinasian obligation without normativity that Geoff mentions is but one particular riff on a Jewish messianic tradition.

Ethics is, of course, concern for others, and how we fulfill our obligations as social beings, but this can range from pious paternalism to radical solidarity with justice projects. At one extreme, ethics is an alibi to pursue one's self-interest with a clear conscience and without being an egoistical monster; at the other extreme, it can swamp the self with the impossible debt of unrequitable obligation to society and the world. One extreme shores up the self and the other extreme undermines the self's autonomy. While deontological ethics, whereby action follows principles, or orthopraxy follows orthodoxy, is the most traditional sort, consequentialist and utilitarian ethics derive principles from the effects of actions, whereby new *doxa* follows practices tested by their worldly consequences. These reversals are altogether different from political projects that aim to transform both the individual and the group rather than assume the individual self as bounded and given. This is why "the incoherent union between ethics and morality" that Geoff mentions is the least interesting aspect of ethics from my perspective, and almost all ethical thought has to do battle with and make its peace with morality. The opening that the ethical provides into the political is far more productive, if such a lead can indeed be pursued, as it often leads in uncomfortable directions. Professional ethics that govern the way someone does her job should be indifferent to partisan politics. However, there are all kinds of questions that demonstrate the inevitable overlap of the ethical with the political, and morality with justice. When does a social ethics trump personal ethics? Does an ethics-infused society imply that education, health care, and employment for all trump personal property rights? Conversely, when does a social ethics turn into the majoritarian bullying of nonconformists? While ethics are about norms, are there non-ethical norms that escape the accountability toward norms that ethical discourse seeks?

While literature is often held to be one of the places where ethics can be discovered, this territory is quicksand, as literature communicates so many assumptions about cultural and social norms. Do the nineteenth-century novels of Jane Austen communicate ethical modes of behavior? Certainly. Do they also defend the values of the propertied gentry? Undoubtedly, they do that as well. Do these two things have something to do with each other? Yes indeed, even if they cannot be wholly reduced to each other. What this means is that literature proposes explanatory models that make us question behavior, but it also promotes social ideologies that make us think, wittingly or unwittingly, that certain ethical ideas are superior to others. While ethics structures problems rather than solves them, ethics also frequently distorts these problems into individual choices, rather than making them into social conditions that are constraints. To choose is a particular ethics that can also be a maddening devil's alternative as demonstrated in *Sophie's Choice*, and therefore one should also be able not to choose and still be ethical. For this reason, I want to devote the second half of my talk to two points. First, I want to propose intellectual hospitality as the overriding ethics of the university, and to offer language, rather than literature, as a place for the testing of this hospitality.

In this context, the preliminary gesture of cosmopolitan hospitality in the twenty-first century university makes available multiple philosophical, religious, and linguistic traditions for an open-ended dialogue with the Kantian problematic, something that comes at a particularly fraught historical moment for European modernity and postmodernity. The Kantian moment has been illegitimately generalized as normative of world-historical conceptual space without adequately taking into account the multiple histories of secularism, secularity, and secularization. The project of hospitality in the university can also be construed as an opening of the juridical power of the university to the genealogies, critiques, and transformative possibilities of subjugated knowledges.

When we turn to the study of language, there are specific psychologies—indeed, pathologies—that arise. Such study is a philosophical means to deepen one's understanding of difference as it makes itself visible through linguistic multiplicity. Whatever happens to a specific language, or to language-in-general, it cannot be mourned because it has never been fully possessed by the subject who claims mastery or some proprietary relationship

over it. That's why language is, in general, different from the more bounded and culture-specific phenomenon of literature. This melancholic attestation is ultimately a reflection on how any investigation of language is a prosthesis of the origin. As Derrida enunciates this paradox in his book, *The Monolingualism of the Other*, "Yes, I speak only one language, but it isn't mine."<sup>1</sup> A characteristic facility with a language, idiom, or dialect—whether in the positivist sense of sociolinguistics, or the more rarefied philosophical one of style—is not, and can never be the same as the structure of linguistic identity and self-identification, whether pre-existing or retroactively imposed. The psychological alternatives created by this impossible responsibility to language are delineated by Derrida as three ethical positions themselves bringing the subject to the brink of insanity: a) forgetting and aphasia, b) integrationist amnesia, and c) hypermnnesia and anamnesis. Those who promote a single global, national, or rational/theoretical language (including apologists for neoliberalism, proponents of globalization, and defenders of minimal rationality) are universalists reacting to linguistic excess with an aphasic gesture. Those who respond to the mathematical sublime of the vast number of languages with preservationist horror are the Romantic hypermnnesiacs. These ethical psychopathologies (including their linguistic symptoms) need analysis and translation especially when it spills over into cultural separatism or the profession of untranslatable or incommensurable difference. Those who propose multiple institutional solutions that limitedly resolve linguistic tensions are perhaps the integrationist amnesiacs of Derrida's parable, and this second position is the rough equivalent of the translation machine that we might call the university-in-the-world. Within such a model, inter-communication among languages occurs by proximity and contiguity, but is not enforced as teleology. Such a canny linguistic cosmopolitanism simultaneously avoids the intolerances of universalism and the blindnesses of relativism, trafficking ceaselessly between integrationist amnesia and Romantic hypermnnesia, tempering critique with hospitality.

Language-oriented ethics always means that we inherit a situation of antinomy rather than transcendence: at any single moment, it should be noted, an ethically oriented subject speaks, not in multiple languages but always in one language; yet, one never speaks just in one language even if one knows just one language. Language divides and differs from itself internally into dialects, idioms, and other forms of secrecy and privacy, even as various attempts to police the system of stabilized languages are gestures of containment and governmental policy that misapprehend their object. Language is much more than an instrument of communication, or a vehicle of culture. Rather, language trans-individually and meta-ethically precedes any subject who identifies or disidentifies with it as such. Precisely because of this pathological limitation of the linguistically speaking subject, the public language of the university flirts with various versions of a cosmopolitan institutional structure. Intellectual hospitality, responsive to what I'm calling the university-in-the-world, can resist the globalizing university by turning the singular language of globalization inside out, forcing an accountability to language as revelatory of ethics, and indeed, even of politics. The university is the place where we alternate between the role of host and guest, from the seminar room to the lecture hall, and from the library to the playing fields, and language, and voluntary group interactivity of many sorts, become the medium of hospitality and critique within a constant dialectics of identification and disidentification with the medium of instruction, whether this is a natural language, a discipline, a game, or a theoretical method. For this reason, rather than confront linguistic imperialism—whether of English, Habermasian discourse ethics, or anything else—with defensive forms of separatism, the ethics of the university should be that of an ongoing and endless translation without a dominant metalanguage. Even as we might be skeptical regarding vitalist notions of language, we may attend to the spectrality of languages that are dead, dying, or forgotten. Language acquires depth when barely-heard melodies are encouraged, therefore replacing ontology with hauntology. This is not as much an ethics that reifies "diversity"—a concept we know has been thoroughly co-opted by transnational corporations—but an ethics that aims to listen for the echo, the murmur, perhaps even the sound of the sea in a shell. To focus on the barely present or even the absent is an ethics of the trace made possible by deconstruction. The ethics of cosmopolitan hospitality fulfills an affirmative function, endorsing what Derrida calls the right to philosophy, perhaps at bottom, the right to language, that Immanuel Levinas describes as involving "an attention to speech or welcome of the face, hospitality and not thematization."<sup>2</sup> By making the singularities of various languages appear beside each other, linguistic hospitality makes available multiple philosophical, cultural, and religious traditions,

putting them into an open-ended dialogue with the Kantian problematic, and also with each other. Linguistic hospitality is not sentimental; it construes an opening of the juridical power of the university to the genealogies, critiques, and transformative possibilities of subjugated knowledges and languages but at the same time, it doesn't claim to save others, or impose a unified metalanguage that choreographs the entire conversation.

My argument is ultimately an argument for the humanities—perhaps that is no surprise at least as a claim. We need to pursue the teaching and translation of languages and language—natural and philosophical and theoretical—in relation to each other with a renewed vigor, without acceding to the simplification entailed by accepting one theoretical metalanguage, or one ethical paradigm. As Derrida asserts, “language itself becomes through and through, structurally, the very element of the alibi: nonbelonging, impossible appropriation.”<sup>3</sup> There is only language, that can be alternately critical and hospitable to itself and to other forms of language, and the liberal humanities are a series of language-based hypotheses and critiques—constructions and deconstructions, hospitalities and hostilities—that persist and continue with the assumption that neither critique nor hospitality can ever dominate, as both embody different principles of centripetality and centrifugality within language, allowing for the possibility of a multi-cornered dialogue with, rather than a dialectics of, Enlightenment. This would be the ethos of an ethically **open** university replete with all comers—whether talkers or doers—in the utopian manner that Aimé Césaire puts it in the *Cahiers du retour au pays natal*: whereby “no race has a monopoly on beauty, intelligence, or strength,” and “there is room for everyone at the rendezvous of victory.” Edward Said had also suggested that, “without wishing to romanticize the university, the university is the last remaining protected space.”<sup>4</sup> Hospitality is what allows for the university to be a bastion of utopian possibility in a commodified and brutalizing world. But this is because we **can** suspend the ethical decision within the university, turn it around and examine it from all sides. Ethics in the university never can, or should, be associated with a particular morality. All moralities, even amoralities and immoralities are welcome for study here, because even they have their normative assumptions and transgressive deviations that can be examined as ethical structures that model decisions within the world. The openness of the university to all kinds of characters, and all forms of thought and reasoning, as an initial welcome without passing judgment, following which inter-animated discussion, debate, and critique would commence—is the most desirable future for the university-in-the-world. I'm still not sure “who cares?” other than us here, and others like us. But that is an important insight to leverage against the categorical imperative. We cannot legislate that others ought to care, but if we demonstrate that we do, and communicate this through our embodied actions, something might communicate itself. By our actions, and our listening to each other and respecting each other by questioning rather than agreeing, we embody an ethics of mutual critique within a structure of intellectual hospitality. That is neither a deontological nor a consequentialist ethics, but a meta-ethical relativism combined with a universal prescriptivism regarding our behavior within the university—these are laboratory rules for intellectual experimentation. What the humanities offer ethics is the following: neither prescriptions, nor even models, but the possibility of unfettered intellectual hospitality as the thought-experiment of inclusion beyond the limit, concerning a world that is limited. This way, we point to what lies before and beyond a specific ethics, even as we freeze the moment of ethical decision, and postpone the day of reckoning, so we can understand further why, or whether, we really need to choose.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 15. In French, the phrase is: “Oui, je n'ai qu'une langue, or ce n'est pas la mienne.”

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press), p. 299.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, “Provocation: Forewords,” in *Without Alibi*, p. xxviii. Indeed, as the French followers of the Russian formalists asserted, “il n'y a pas de metalangage.”

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *The Edward Said Reader*, eds. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage, 2000), p. 436.